Behind Japanese Students' Silence in English Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

This ethnographic study investigated what challenges Japanese university students faced in communicating in English with their teacher. The study focused on the functions of student-teacher interaction in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts in Japan. Participant observations were conducted during two English classes and further data was collected from four students through semi-structured interviews. The study revealed three factors that could have interrupted student-teacher interaction: A collective communication system created by students, respect for their teacher and peers, and students' higher expectations of what they should say. Academic support for teaching cultural differences in educational settings and encouraging students to speak up individually should contribute to communicative strengths in the classroom and wider intercultural situations.

INTRODUCTION

East Asian students are often perceived as silent from the perspective of Western teachers. The debate has centered on cultural differences such as classroom silence in the East and the privileging of speech in Western education (Cheng, 2000; Ellwood & Nakane, 2009; Littlewood, 1999; Liu & Littlewood, 1997). Critical thinking and self-expression are at the core of mainstream pedagogy in the West, while memorization and choral recitation are the main learning strategies in Japanese and Chinese schools (Atkinson, 1997; Gorsuch, 1998). Giving opinions is fairly common in U.S. education and is often considered socially inappropriate in an Asian context, because the "role of the subordinate/student is to listen, observe, and learn" (Atkinson, 1997, p. 83).

In addition to bridging a gap between academic cultures, Asian students in the West often struggle with social prejudice (Rich & Troudi, 2006), acculturative stress (Kuo & Roysircar, 2006), an unequal power balance between non-native minorities and mainstream native speakers (Shi, 2011) and identity negotiation in the classroom (Morita, 2004). In a study by Ohata (2005), Japanese students at a U.S. college were afraid of negative evaluations, lacked confidence in their

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English, felt intimidated by competition with other Japanese students and struggled to change their learning style from reserved to assertive.

While many studies examined Asian students in Western academic environments, scant research has investigated insights into Japanese students' silence in an EFL context in Japan. The aim of this study was to understand what happens when a homogeneous small group of Japanese university students are in the class of a native English speaker. Even when they are in their home country and their peers have a similar English level, they still find it challenging to actively communicate with the teacher. As past studies have pointed out, Japanese students remain silent because they feel afraid of losing face by making mistakes in front of others (Anderson, 1993; Brown, 2004; Kawamura, Kudo & Hail, 2006). Further investigation is necessary to reveal how students' roles and relationships with their teacher and peers are situated in class context and how those influence student participation. Insight into students' interaction with a native English teacher can prepare them with adequate skills to participate in an intercultural context in the classroom and the global society.

FRAMEWORK OF EAST VS WEST

Communication Style Differences

Differences in communication styles between the East and West have been well documented in the field of intercultural communication (Scollon, Scollon & Jones, 2000; Stewart & Bennett, 1991; Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005). Hall (1976) described that in a "High context-culture" such as Japan, people tend to employ indirect communication styles and implicit understanding, which contradicts the American "Low-context culture" where people clarify their intentions by using direct messages. In Low-context cultures where ideas are explicitly expressed by words, silence is generally considered as an absence of communication (Varner & Beamer, 2011). In High-context cultures, people believe that "it is through silence that one can discover the truth inside oneself" under the influence of Buddhism (Varner & Beamer, 2011, p.248).

The distinction between High and Low context cultures and images of people have been criticized for overgeneralization (Kubota, 2015). Hall's concept was enormously influential because it established a framework of comparing cultures, which was followed by a number of researchers (Shaules, 2007). Understanding cultural difference was considered as a way to solve intercultural conflict and develop human potential (Shaules, 2007). When people from High and Low context cultures conduct business, misunderstandings might occur due to the different

expectations of explicitness (Matsumoto, 2000) and focus on harmonious relationships or independent action (Nisbett & Masuda, 2007).

Communication styles are also influenced by collectivism and individualism within a culture. Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov (2010) examined six dimensions of national culture: Power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation and indulgence. East Asians value group orientation, face-saving and fulfilling others' needs, while people in Europe and North America focus on an independent self and freedom (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010). Their theory is not applicable to individual values (Bond, Žegarac & Spencer-Oatey, 2000), but it demonstrates clear differences between Japan and the U.S., where individualism is much more highly placed. In collectivist cultures, people do not feel obligated to talk unless they need to transfer information, while people in individualist cultures often find it necessary to start social conversations as they feel uncomfortable with silence (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010). Many East Asians in collective cultures perceive themselves in relation to others and expected social roles (Kanagawa, Cross & Marks, 2001). The desire to meet one's role in a given situation makes people sensitive to falling short of others' expectations. Japanese people tend to talk about themselves with negative information, although such self-criticism is considered as a sign of low self-esteem among Americans (Kanagawa, Cross & Marks, 2001).

Behavioral differences are significant factors of communication. Europeans and Americans may perceive Asian gestures as "lacking ambition and self-esteem," while Asians interpret European and American expression as "intrusive and aggressive" (Bennett, 2013, p.67). Members of High-contact cultures, such as French and Italian, often make direct eye contact, look at face and have body contacts. East Asians in Low-contact cultures prefer indirect eye gazes, keeping personal space and speaking in a lower tone (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005). When these cultural differences in communication styles and values are applied to the classroom, it shapes how teacher and students interact with each other and constructs classroom cultures.

Cultural Differences in Classrooms

Personal matters and individual opinions were discouraged under the significance of others in collective cultures (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005; Triandis, 1989). As Shimahara (1998, p.221) suggested, "(t)he way in which the Japanese see themselves in relation to others is distinct and central to Japanese culture." In a classroom context, students are not only afraid of losing face in front of their classmates, but also unwilling to stand out from others through speaking up and showing off their abilities (Brown, 2004). Anderson (1993, p.104) summarized Japanese students' key communicative styles as: "Group-mindedness, consensual decision-making, formalized

speechmaking and listener responsibility," which often contradicts the classroom that Western English teachers hope to establish. Different perceptions deliver different learning styles. Asians tend to employ an "intuitive way of learning" which encourages modeling, repeating, practicing until learners master the form, although this strategy appears uncreative to Westerners (Bennett, 2013, p.76).

According to Cameron (2000), speaking is the core of Western education. Talking is considered as a process of empowering students and constructing deeper understanding (Cameron, 2000). The dynamic change, originated in Britain and spread in Australia, transformed teacher-centered classroom into speech-dominant in the late 1960s and 1970s (Ellwood & Nakane, 2009). Miller (1995, p.32) elaborated that "passivity implies a negligent attitude toward learning" from Western perspectives. Silence is not problematic from an Asian perspective, although it is in Western education.

Attitudes toward communication in early childhood education also differ between Japan and the U.S., according to Minami (2002). Caudil and Weinstein (1969) found that middle-class Japanese mothers communicated far less frequently with their toddlers than American mothers did. A characteristic of collective culture, which restrains utterances, is critical in shaping one's language use from a very early stage (Minami, 2002). Usui (2001), who cross-examined Japanese and American school systems found that the topics of empathy with others, kindness and warm personal relationships frequently appeared in Japanese textbooks. American school textbooks contained more topics about expressing a strong self, independence, strong will and self-assertion (Usui, 2001). Through observing science classrooms at primary schools in Tokyo, Linn, Lewis, Tsuchida, and Songer (2000) discovered that many science activity structures overlapped with those of model programs in the U.S. classroom culture. They differed according to the Japanese long-term educational emphasis on collaboration and social ethics, which enabled students to have "respectful, lively discussion in family-like small groups" (Linn et al., 2000, p. 13).

Criticisms of the East / West Dichotomy

It is important to be aware of criticisms on these simplified structures, in which Japan or Asia always contradicts the U.S. within a framework of East versus West. Kumaravadivelu (2003, p.710) criticized three common stereotypes about Asian students held by professionals: "They (a) are obedient to authority, (b) lack critical thinking skills, and (c) do not participate in classroom interaction. It was argued that these stereotypes were not always sustained by research and could be also observed among mainstream North American students (Kumaravadivelu, 2003).

The ethnographic research conducted by Ellwood and Nakane (2009) revealed more complex

views of Japanese students on silence at universities in Australia. Although teachers recognized the Japanese students as preferring to be silent and lacking critical thinking and confidence, they did desire to talk, participate and be a part of teacher-student interaction. A number of factors, such as managing turn taking, made them struggle to participate. Some students maintained critical views on participation, wondering why they needed to ask questions when they knew the answers (Ellwood & Nakane, 2009). Nakane (2007) also found that lack of linguistic proficiency as well as "context-specific mismatch" between students' preferred learning styles and those expected in class-interaction made Japanese students hesitant to participate. The findings suggested that Japanese students were not simply being silent to obey the authority or lacked critical thinking, as discussed in the East versus West framework.

Kubota (1999) criticized the East-West dichotomy by arguing that the image of Japanese culture was constructed by the discourse of Western views on otherness and the emphasis on the uniqueness of Japanese culture, which was built to scaffold Japanese identity. It was argued that the images of U.S. and East Asian classrooms were constructed by the perceptions of self and other that emerged from colonialism (Kubota, 2001). As she noted, "(c)olonialism indeed produced the sense of Self, the European culture, which had to be made radically different from the Other" (Kubota, 2001, p.26). When U.S. public education is the center of concern, American classrooms and students' achievements are often perceived problematic. In comparison to Asian classrooms, "they suddenly become close to ideal – the norm with positive values" (Kubota, 2001, p.26).

Function of participation may vary not only across cultures, but also among levels and sizes of classes as well as perspectives of teachers and students. Fritschner (2000) who examined U.S. undergraduate science courses found that very few students orally participated in introductory classes, while students participated much more frequently in upper-division classes. It was also reported that class size significantly influenced how much students participated (Fassinger, 1996). Interestingly, professors believed "preparation, confidence, interests in peers' comments and questions, and comprehension of class content" correlated with student participation, while students perceived that only "confidence" was the factor that determines participation (Fassinger, 1996).

Aforementioned arguments indicate that student participation is shaped not only by cultural traits and educational backgrounds, but also by images constructed by historical discourse and uniquely situated classroom-specific factors. Teachers and students may have different views on participation. Further context-based investigation will contribute to the current understanding of Japanese students' silence in an EFL classroom.

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METHODS

The purpose of this study is to break down further insights into Japanese students' silence, which is specifically featured in the EFL context with a native English teacher. An ethnographic approach that investigates insider's perspectives in a specific cultural context (Hammersley, 2006) should be effective for a deeper understanding of Japanese students' silence.

Two English classes at an academic organization in Japan were investigated. Traditionally, ethnography for anthropologists meant living with a group of people to interpret their cultural practices, beliefs, values and world perspectives (Hammersley, 2006). Today, ethnographic studies tend to be much shorter and focus on particular events of daily lives experienced by a group of people (Hammersley, 2006). The current study employed "ethnographic tools" including participant observation and interviews, rather than conducting traditional ethnography, such as collecting data over many years (Green & Bloome, 1997, p.183). Both classes were 90 minutes and video-recorded under the agreement of the teacher and students. Ten students, four males and six females, participated in the classes. Fieldnotes and interview transcripts were triangulated to analyse participants' perspectives on social events (Ely, Anzul, Friedman, Garner & McCormack Steinmetz, 1991)

There were two reasons for conducting the study in this class environment. First, all the students were in my seminar for six months and I was familiar with their personalities and English competency. Maintaining both an insider and outsider perspective is key for ethnographic study (Fetterman, 1998; Gregory, 2005). Second, the aim of this study was to closely examine student interaction with their teacher. A narrower focus on a small group of students was ideal for such an investigation, rather than regular English classrooms where more than twenty students study. The study also examined functions of silence among the students, instead of focusing on students' foreign language anxiety, which has been the subject of past studies (Andrade & Williams, 2009; Liu & Jackson, 2008; Ohata, 2005). Even though the hours of participant observations were limited, rich data was obtained from the interviews with four students. The interviews were conducted in Japanese and the translations were made by the researcher. The summary of the data sources is presented as Table 1. All the names are pseudonyms.

Table 1 The summary of the data sources

Date of investigation	September, 2014
Place of investigation	Two EFL classes: Candle making and playing cricket (90 minute each) Both were conducted by a South African male teacher

Types of data collection	Participant observation in two classes (180 minutes, video-recorded) Semi-structured interviews with four participants (30-50 minutes) (Kenji, Yoko, Saki and Nanako)
The participants	Members of intercultural communication seminar Male (Kenji, Daisuke, Tomohiro and Koichi) Female (Mina, Asuka, Yoko, Saki, Nanako and Chie)

THE CONTEXT AND THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE STUDY

Ten Japanese undergraduates participated in two EFL classes. The subjects of the lessons were candle making and playing cricket. The classes were activity-based and designed to teach British culture, while also encouraging students to use English for communicative practice. Students were required to speak English to teachers and staff members inside and outside classrooms at this facility. In the candle-making class, students sat around one big table and the teacher stood aside it. The cricket class was held in the gym. Everyone, including the teacher and myself, participated in the activities during class hours. Both classes followed a similar flow to regular English classes. They started with a short instruction about the class, introductory activities to more advanced activities and a summary of the class. The students' English levels were given to the teacher in advance and the teacher spoke accordingly.

The students were between 20 and 21 years old. They were in their third-year, studying media and communications. They belonged to the same seminar for one semester (15 weeks) prior to attending the English classes. Some of them had been friends since they entered university. Their English levels varied. They were enrolled in the seminar because of their interest in learning about intercultural communication. Two participants, Kenji and Mina, traveled abroad several times to study English and seemed to have a higher proficiency than other students. All the participants were not taking English classes at their university at the time the study was conducted, because they had finished their mandatory English courses. Only Kenji was taking English lessons outside the university. The students participated in the classes at this academic facility for the first time and it was also their first time to meet the teacher.

RESULTS

Overall, the students were relaxed and enjoyed the classes with the help of activity-focused class designs and the experience of a teacher who has taught English in Japan for several years. Careful examination of fieldnotes and video identified patterns of interaction among the teacher and the

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students. The key findings suggested that the students unintentionally formed a team in order to communicate with the teacher. They put "gatekeepers" who transmitted messages between the teacher and the students. While the gatekeepers were communicating with the teacher, the rest often remained silent. Below are: (a) the patterns of interaction (b) the situations when the patterns of interaction did not function and (c) the thought process of Japanese students (interview results), with some examples of their dialogues.

Patterns of Interaction

All the students faced language barriers with their teacher. When they struggled to express something, they sought the help of others and cooperated with each other. The interaction was often between more than two students who helped each other talk to the teacher. One of the examples was as follows:

Excerpt 1

Asuka: Nioi, nioi… nanda? [*Nioi…* what is *nioi* in English?]

Yoko: Smell.

Teacher: Oh, you are getting the smell of the downstairs?

Asuka: Yes, cake.

Yoko: Cake smell?

Saki: Yes [Laugh].

Teacher: [Laugh] I think under this room is a kitchen.

Asuka: Oh. Sugu dinner tabetai. [I want to eat dinner soon]

Teacher: Where are you going to eat dinner? The dinner hall or a pub?

Asuka: [Silent]

Teacher: Are you going to eat at the dinner hall or a pub?

Asuka: Dinner hall or pub?

Saki: Dinner hall.

Asuka: Dinner hall.

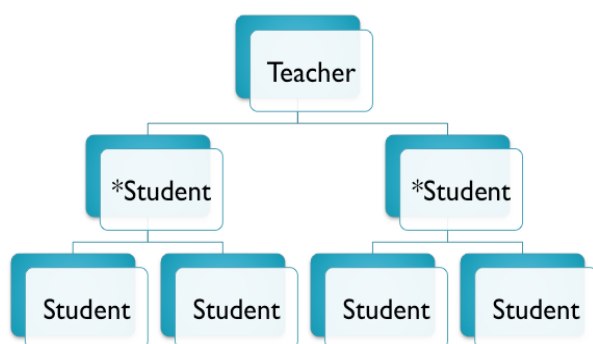Teacher: Oh I see.

[15/09/2014]

In this conversation, Asuka could not remember a word. Then Yoko and Saki supplemented the English that Asuka needed to communicate with the teacher. It was not direct question and response between the teacher and Asuka. It was a layered process of communication that contained

pauses and silence from each student.

When the students needed to ask questions and make requests to the teacher, they tried to communicate through the gatekeeper whom they implicitly chose. Figure 1 illustrates the interactional flow of teacher and students.

Figure 1 Interactional flow of teacher and students (* are the gatekeepers)

When the students needed to choose the color of the candle, Tomohiro realized that black was missing. He expressed himself as follows:

Excerpt 2

Tomohiro: Eh! Kuro naino? [What? Don't we have black?]

Kenji: Hai yarioaoshi! [Yeah, you have to design again!]

Tomohiro: Eh, Majide? [Oh, really?]

Sachie (researcher): Demo, ushironi aru kamoyo? Sensei ni kiitemitara?

[But he may have black somewhere behind. Why don't you ask your teacher?]

Tomohiro: Eh… nee sensei ni kiite. [Hmmm. Hey, can you ask the teacher?]

Kenji: Nande orega? [Why me?]

Tomohiro: Nee sensei ni kiite. [Hey, can you ask the teacher?]

Daisuke: Nante kikeba ii? [How can I ask this in English?]

Kenji: "I want black" de iinjyane? [I think it's okay to say "I want black."]

Daisuke: Okay. Jyaa, kiitekuru. [Okay, I will ask and come back.]

[15/09/2014]

Here again, the students tried to cooperate with each other to be ready to talk to the teacher. Daisuke, who was playing a role of gatekeeper, was not necessarily the strongest in English. He was outgoing and might have had less communication apprehension, which was a characteristic of the

gatekeepers. Tomohiro tried to deliver his question to the teacher through Daisuke, who needed the help of Kenji. This layered process required some time until he went and talked to the teacher. It was apparent that they tried to bridge language barriers with the teacher for the communicative tasks they were trying to accomplish in class.

Situations When the Patterns of Interaction did not Function

While students cooperated to talk to the teacher, the flow of interaction was interrupted particularly when gatekeepers could not function in their roles. This happened when they struggled to understand the teacher's humor, when they thought that their attitudes could be disrespectful to the teacher, and when they needed to make decisions. Overall, when they thought they had negative response to the teacher, such as lacking adequate understanding of instructions or requesting too much, they stopped interacting with the teacher and silence emerged. Excerpt 3 shows how students stopped communicating in the middle of the friendly ice-breaking time:

Excerpt 3
Teacher: So, where are you guys from?
Yoko: Kanagawa.
Teacher: Kanagawa! How long did you guys take to get here?
Nanako: Two days. [Misunderstood his question as "How long are you going to stay here?"]
Teacher: Wow, two days? Did you guys walk?
Everyone: [Silent] Walk…? [Looked at each other]
[15/09/2014]

Although the teacher was trying to make students aware of the mistake in a humorous way, nobody understood his intention. Later Nanako and Kenji confirmed in the interviews that they thought he changed a topic of conversation. When I explained what was happening, the students said they did not expect such a reaction from the teacher because Japanese speakers would usually say, "Did you mean two hours?" when talking to non-native speakers. There were many small situations like this, in which the teacher's humorous intention did not meet student expectations. Rather than asking him to clarify, they remained silent.

When students figured that their attitudes or questions would be disrespectful to the teacher, they did not bring their issues to the teacher, even though he would have welcomed their questions. In the cricket-themed class, the teacher explained how to play the mini game. It was more complicated than the instruction in the candle-making class and everyone seemed uncertain,

looking at each other. The instructor asked if they had any questions, but nobody asked any. Just before the game started, Kenji came and asked me to explain how to play the game. Shortly after, Yoko came to ask me the same question, too. I told them that they needed to ask the teacher questions if they were not sure. They finally went to ask the teacher to explain the rules one more time. When the students felt bad asking something to the teacher, they often said, "Iiya iiya [that's okay, that's okay]." When the students could not understand the teacher, they often froze instead of saying, "I don't understand."

Decision-making was another type of utterance that they struggled to make. In the candle-making class, the teacher asked what the students wanted to do several times. Nobody said a word and there was always a little silence before I stepped in and encouraged them to speak up. Excerpt 4 illustrates how it occurred:

Excerpt 4

Teacher: Okay. Do you wanna take a walk or want to work on this handout?

Students: [Silent, looking at each other]

Teacher: We can take a walk if you want? Or we can do this handout. [Explained with gestures]

Students: [Silent, looking at each other]

Teacher: What do you want to do?

Students: [Silent, nobody looked at the teacher]

Sachie (researcher): Do you want to do the handout? Yes or no?

Students: Yes. Yes, handout.

[15/09/2014]

After two classes were over, I asked the teacher if he had any comments about the classes and students. He positively evaluated students who worked hard and acted in a friendly manner to everyone. He thought that the students did not speak very much in class, perhaps because they were shy.

What Students Thought About While Being Silent (Interview results)

Shortly after their classes, I interviewed Kenji, Yoko, Saki and Nanako. They were randomly chosen according to their schedules and availability to speak with me. Interviews were conducted on September 15th and 29th, 2014. They were asked what they thought about the classes, what made them struggle to speak to the teacher (or other staff members at the facility), what was happening while they were silent and what they wanted to do to improve their communication

skills. All of them enjoyed the classes and liked the teacher. Regarding their struggles to speak English, the participants pointed out three issues. The biggest matter was respect for the teacher. All of them did not want to trouble the teacher by showing a lack of understanding or requesting too much. They had a similar respect for other classmates, which made them silent when decision-making was needed. Another factor was the misunderstanding of the context and lack of skills to connect vocabulary.

Respect to the Teacher

What appeared common among the interviewees was that they did not want to trouble the teacher, even though they could not solve their own issues in class. Yoko said:

> You know, he explained to me and I did not understand. Then, he explained it to me again in a different way, and I still did not get it. Then, I felt so bad and could not ask anymore. Maybe once or twice is okay, but not any more. I just feel bad.

Similarly, Kenji explained why he did not ask the teacher when he did not understand how to play cricket. He said "Basically, none of us wants to trouble the teacher. That's not only in English classes, but also in any other subjects." He continued:

> I just thought that "Oh, god! I made a mistake! I did not listen well!" when the teacher explained how to play cricket. Then I asked other students if they understood, because if it was an issue that we could solve by ourselves, we do not want to trouble the teacher. But nobody understood. So, I went to talk to you because I felt it was easier as you were with us [from the same university].

Kenji thought that it would be easier to ask questions if he had a long-term relationship with the teacher, like he had at his language school. "But, I still find it difficult to trouble teachers in Japan, because there is always a certain distance between us. We are not used to communicating with teachers," he insisted. Saki and Nanako also discussed their concerns about troubling the teacher or ignoring other students' feelings. Regarding the silence during decision-making, Saki revealed:

> First, we had to make sure our understanding of what the teacher said was right. Then, we thought about what everyone wanted to do. I could not decide what we should do, just

based on my opinion. Then, we voted and took a majority decision.

Surprisingly, they did all of that without verbally communicating. They felt bad to openly discuss something in Japanese in front of the teacher. So, they used their eyes and facial expressions, or whispered to another student sitting next to them. While they appeared silent, they were actually quite busy, confirming, asking and expressing opinions implicitly. Kenji pointed out that:

> It is our consideration towards others. When I was in the U.S., everyone quickly responded to the teacher and said whatever they wanted to say, so did I. But, when I am in a group of Japanese students, I am unintentionally concerned about how I should respond to the teacher and what other students are thinking about.

Their respect to the teacher made Saki ashamed of herself, too. She said, "I studied English a lot, but all I could say was 'like' or 'use' or something like that. I could not make a proper sentence to respond to the teacher. That's really shameful. I felt miserable." They hesitated to approach the teacher for help because they thought that not understanding the instruction or being unable to use English were disrespectful and shameful. They tried hard to play a role of good students in the classroom context and could not break the communication barriers.

Misunderstanding of the Context

In some situations, even though students heard and understood the teacher's comment, they struggled to understand its meaning, which often led to silence. Nanako said:

> I knew the teacher said, "walk" [referring to Excerpt 3], but I did not know why all of the sudden he started talking about walking. […] I might have heard "fire," too [in the cricket class]. I knew the teacher was laughing. But I would have never guessed that he was talking about how he would be fired if we hit the ball too hard.

Yoko also picked up some of the words that the teacher said. She thought that she was able to have mutual understanding with the teacher most of the time. However, "I sometimes could not see the whole picture," she noted. Regarding the humor that the teacher tried to bring to class, Kenji continued:

> Maybe it was a joke? But I did not know how to respond to the joke. If I lived overseas, I

would have been able to pick it up more quickly. But for me, growing up in Japan, there is almost no chance to guess the meaning, because it's not how we talk.

What seemed apparent was that they knew they missed something. But, they were not able to clarify their questions by asking, "What do you mean?" or "What is fire?" which could have expanded further conversation, rather than resulting in silence. Perhaps, their concern about not troubling the teacher made them hesitate to pursue their questions.

Nanako further commented that she was not sure what was appropriate in a specific context, such as meals. In Japanese, she would say "*Itadakimasu* [I appreciate receiving this meal]" before eating, but she did not know if saying something like that in English would be appropriate. She had many small questions like this, but did not know how to ask them in English.

Lack of Skills to Connect Vocabulary to Make Sentences

Another factor that made them hesitate to speak was the difficulty in making words into sentences. Nanako said:

> I wanted to ask more questions and I could come up with some words. But to make a sentence and change it to a question was really hard. I did not know where to use prepositions and what the subject of the sentence was, because we often omit subjects in Japanese. I can say, "I have a pen" or "Tom is taller than Sam" quickly, because that's how I studied English so far.

Yoko and Saki also said that they could come up with some words, but could not make sentences. Yoko elaborated, saying:

> I need to think about how to respond, by connecting one word to another. So, it takes quite a bit of time, but all I could say was a few words. That was really a shame. […] In Japan where I only meet Japanese people, I find it weird to speak English to each other. I need to come to this kind of place and get used to it more.

Kenji felt this "shame" even stronger, because he studied and practiced English in the U.S. When he was still not able to make proper questions or sentences, he felt disappointed with himself. The students were aware that their English was limited, but did not know how to overcome their proficiency issues. They were somewhat "ashamed" that they studied English for eight years from

junior high school to university (Kenji went abroad, too), however, they could only say a couple of words. They were surprised by their lack of proficiency and opted not to speak much in order to mask this. They thought that "being able to say only a few words" was shameful as a university student. Their silence was caused by a gap between what they thought they should be able to do and what they could actually do.

DISCUSSION

What was most striking was that although the students appeared quiet and shy on the surface, they were actually cooperating, creating their own interaction system, implicitly exchanging thoughts, and undergoing struggles within themselves. There were three reasons why they appeared silent in these EFL contexts.

First, they implicitly created the interactional patterns to communicate with the teacher, in which they formed a team with gatekeepers in the center. They cooperated each other to construct meaning and let gatekeepers deliver messages. In this way, each student's utterance was somewhat restricted. When one was jumping in to supplement English, the one who originally started the conversation remained silent. More obvious examples were when students asked gatekeepers to communicate with the teacher [e.g. Excerpt 2]. Most students reminded silent after asking gatekeepers to deliver their messages, although they were not necessarily the weakest ones in English. They were willing to communicate and tried to contribute to the class discussions. Due to the strategy they used, however, their communication was not always apparent in class, except for those gatekeepers.

Second, the students found it very difficult to make negative responses to the teacher, because they considered it disrespectful. When the responses were positive, such as "Do you like playing sports?" "Yes," the interaction was rather smooth. They did not want to say anything negative in front of the teacher, such as "I did not understand the rules," or "I took off the wick and need to fix it." They often avoided eye contact with the teacher, compromised what they really wanted to do and did not fix the problem (e.g. kept the candle without a wick). They continued class, as if no breakdowns were occurring because they felt bad for the teacher. That was their way to show respect to the teacher who, as such, stood in a distant position from them.

Perhaps the teacher would have appreciated helping the students with their issues. He was always being friendly, which the students really liked. If they talked about their comprehension issues, there would have been more communication opportunities. It was still difficult for the students to confront their teacher with their own difficulties as they wanted to solve them by

themselves as much as they could. This hesitation to talk about their problems was also observed when they could not comprehend the context of the teacher's humor. They were not able to ask the teacher to clarify the meaning because they felt bad for not understanding. They decided to remain silent and tried to let it go.

Their respect to their peers also made it challenging for them to make decisions out loud. They did not want to express their thoughts because it might have been different from others, which could end up with someone compromising his/her ideas. They were not afraid of confronting each other, yet they did not want to interrupt anyone's way of thinking. The decisions that the teacher asked the students to make were not quite serious, such as if they wanted to take a walk. The students still found it challenging to answer individually without confirming the questions and everyone's opinions.

Finally, the students' images of how much English an average university student should be able to speak made them hesitate to make incorrect sentences or single word utterances. They had to think about where to use prepositions or how to connect words to make sentences before uttering something. This process seemed quite common among learners with lower proficiency. Yet, when this occurred several times in the classroom context, it created several moments of prolonged silence, even though it was supposed to be a time and place to practice communication. After studying English for eight years or more, they had their own high expectations for the forms of English that they thought they should use. They were ashamed of falling short of their expectations and did not make an utterance to hide their limited skills.

Unlike what was reported in past studies (e.g. Anderson, 1993; Brown, 2004; Kawamura, Kudo & Hail, 2006), the students did not mention their fear of making mistakes in front of class or standing out from others. Particularly the gatekeepers took leading roles in interaction [Excerpt 2]. Like the example of Nanako [Excerpt 3], students were not afraid of responding to the teacher, even if their response contained some misunderstanding or errors. The students did not just passively follow the teacher and obey the authority, as discussed in Atkinson (1997). Furthermore, what was happening in the classrooms could not be explained by the simple East versus West framework, in which passive East Asians struggle to fit into communicative Western teaching. The students created interactional patterns and tried to communicate with their teacher [Excerpt 1]. They exchanged thoughts without openly speaking up [Excerpt 4]. Although they appeared to be silent at several situations, they were actively engaging with class activities in their own way. Such effort would probably not have been perceived as communication in the eyes of a teacher who thought that they were being shy.

On the other hand, a collective mindset (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010; Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005; Triandis, 1989) seemed to have influenced how Japanese students situated

themselves in EFL lessons. The students hesitated to speak up for the sake of other peers, particularly when decision making was required. As Kanagawa, Cross and Markus (2001) discussed, they demonstrated concerns about their limited English skills, which could not meet their own expectations of "good students" in a social context. They did not speak up to be respectful to the teacher while hiding their lack of understanding, which seemed appropriate to the students.

Conceptual difference between the teacher and the students emerged in the students' attitudes of trying not to cause troubles to the teacher. What the students considered troubles might not have been troubles from the perspective of the teacher. What they did in order to be respectful to the teacher might not have been perceived in the same way by the teacher. Although the teacher confirmed that the students had very good attitudes in classes and evaluated them positively, their hidden effort for being good students might not have been recognizable. Similarly, the teacher's effort to make a friendly, communicative classroom, such as following up students' mistakes with a humor [Excerpt 3], was not apparent in the eyes of the students.

Even though they were ashamed of their English competence, if they could say a word, the teacher would try to understand their intention [e.g. Excerpt 1]. It could lead to further communication, which can be beneficial for more speaking and listening practice. It did not happen because the students thought that saying only a few words would not be appropriate for a university level EFL class.

In summary, there seemed to be a mismatch between the classroom culture that the teacher and the students tried to construct. The teacher tried to communicate with each student in a way that the students could understand and respond, in order to construct a communicative classroom. While the students responded actively when positive comments were called for, they withdrew themselves when they did not want to trouble the teacher by responding negatively.

Pedagogical Implication

In order to create more communicative EFL classrooms, it seemed significant that both the teacher and the students recognize each other's intentions and perspectives. Participation in general is not always an effective indicator of students' academic achievements. As was shown by Programme for International Student Assessment (2012), so-called "quiet" East Asians scored higher than "communicative and critical" Western students in science, reading and math tests. In EFL classrooms, where the focus of learning is communication, however, students should practice speaking and listening without any hesitation.

The students should become aware that even one word or a short sentence is the start of

communication. Asking a question about the instructions, clarifying meaning and seeking help are not troubles in an EFL context, but potential triggers of communication. Without realizing this, the students would remain silent, compromise what they need, and keep wondering why they cannot speak well. While cooperation is important, they should be aware that individuals should be responsible for their own comments, without relying on someone else to speak for them. Asking teachers to clarify themselves can be very difficult for non-native speakers, because they think native speakers speak "perfect" English and teachers give "proper" explanations. If they could not understand something, they would blame themselves for their lack of understanding, rather than questioning the teacher.

However, being silent and avoiding trouble does not solve any issues. If nobody explicitly draws attention to source of breakdown, the students would not be able to understand context-based meanings, like the humor in Excerpt 3. Picking up some vocabulary while listening is sometimes not enough for mutual understanding, because cultural or situational factors are attached to the language. It is important to teach students how to ask questions for their growth and own goals. Such skills are important not only to improve English fluency, but also to participate in intercultural, global society with many different people from various backgrounds. It is an everyday matter that we do not understand what someone said. These breakdowns in communication can occur because of our differing expectations, how to face issues or convey our feelings. Simply trying to put a positive face on communicative trouble spots, acting as if no problems have occurred, would not improve our mutual understanding.

On the other hand, teachers should also become aware of what is happening behind the students' silence. Students may be trying to deliver communication in their own way, even though sometimes it is not obvious. Simply judging East Asian students as silent and passive may lead teachers to a misinterpretation of the classroom context and make it challenging to bridge any gap.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE PRACTICE

Teacher-student interactions in two EFL sessions were examined with ethnographic techniques, revealing what made it challenging for Japanese students to speak English with their teacher who is a native speaker of the language. Three possible factors for the challenge emerged from participant observation and interviews: The interactional patterns that students created, their respect to the teacher and their hesitation to show their limited language skills. The purpose of the analysis was to gain insights, through structured follow-up interviews, into the Japanese students' silence, rather than making generalizations. Findings from this study can be still useful for many language

teachers in various contexts to interpret student-teacher interactions and functions in classrooms. Nevertheless, extending contextual analysis into various class styles, population, locations and time are necessary for further understanding. It would be enlightening to examine teachers' perspectives and compare them with students' points of view. Future research may demonstrate that the often-researched "dichotomies" of East/West and teachers/students are not always sufficient to explain the diversity in the language classrooms.

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